

## Character Class

# Ninjas with Class

By Skip Williams



This column aims to provide players with tips on creating effective and interesting characters of various types. So whether you're a beginning player creating your very first character or an experienced gamer looking to put some punch into an old standby, this column is for you!

## The Pros and Cons of a Ninja

The popular image of the ninja is a stealthy killer who can materialize out of nowhere like a ghost and loose a storm of blades or fists. Once she has devastated her foe, she moves on as mysteriously as she came.

### Ninja Assets

When you choose a ninja, you get fighting skill, plus a long list of special abilities that make the character more effective in combat, give her extra mobility, and literally allow her to disappear. You can use these abilities to make your ninja a silent killer if you choose, but that stereotype is not your only option. She might also function as a spy, a cat burglar, a tireless explorer, a peasant hero, a flashy acrobat, or any combination of these archetypes. Below are several assets you have going for you when you choose a ninja.



- **Ki Powers:** Starting at 1st level, a ninja has a pool of internal energy that she can focus to enhance her body or mind. As long as she keeps at least some *ki* in reserve, she also gains a +2 bonus on her Will saves.

Other effects that a ninja can achieve by expending *ki* are described below. Her ninja level and Wisdom bonus determine how often she can use her *ki* each day, as noted in the ninja class description.

- **Armor Class Bonus:** A ninja has a sixth sense when it comes to warding off physical attacks. When she is unarmored, unencumbered, and not immobilized, she adds her Wisdom bonus (if any) to her Armor Class against all forms of attack, even touch attacks. She also gains an additional +1 bonus to Armor Class at 5th level and every five levels thereafter.
- **Fairly Good Attack Bonus:** A ninja's base attack bonus -- +3 per four levels -- is second only to that of the fighter and other more martial classes. Though it's not the best in the game, it does give the ninja a decent chance to hit her foes.
- **Sudden Strike:** A ninja can deal extra damage to any foe who is denied his Dexterity bonus to Armor Class (if any). Sudden strike is similar to the rogue's sneak attack ability, though it is slightly less flexible because it doesn't work against foes that the ninja merely flanks.

- **Good Reflex Saves:** A ninja uses the best save progression in the game for Reflex saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural grace helps her avoid most effects that could deal damage or entrap her, such as area spells, entanglement, and many traps.
- **High Skill Points:** With 6 skill points per level, even a ninja with a poor Intelligence score has plenty of skill points to spend.
- **Good Skill Selection:** The ninja has a long list of class skills, most of which serve to make her perceptive, self-sufficient, agile, and sly. With her broad skill selection and plentiful skill points, she can be a stealthy commando, a crafty pickpocket, or any kind of character in between.
- **Finding Traps:** Starting at 1st level, a ninja can use the Search skill to locate traps. This ability can make infiltrating enemy strongholds and exploring dungeons or ruins much less risky.
- **Ghostly Footsteps:** A ninja can become amazingly stealthy just by focusing her *ki*. Beginning at 2nd level, she can become invisible for 1 round. This ability comes in handy for quick escapes or slipping past the most vigilant sentries. At 10th level, she can become ethereal for 1 round instead of merely invisible. This ability lets her literally walk through walls and sneak past foes that can smell or hear invisible opponents. At 20th level, she can remain ethereal for several rounds at a time to perform extended reconnaissance, engage in prolonged ethereal combat, and pull off miraculous escapes.
- **Envenomed Weaponry:** Beginning at 3rd level, a ninja can apply poison to her weapons without the usual chance to poison herself (see page 296 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*). Starting at 9th level, she can apply poison to a weapon as a move action rather than a standard action. This ability can bring poison into play so quickly that foes may not notice its presence until they're already committed to combat.
- **Impressive Leaps:** When she attains 4th level, a ninja makes Jump checks as though she had the Run feat plus a running start, even when making standing jumps.
- **Impressive Acrobatics:** Beginning at 6th level, a ninja gains a +2 bonus on Climb, Jump, and Tumble checks. This bonus increases by +2 every six ninja levels thereafter.
- **Amazing Dodges:** Starting at 6th level, a ninja can focus her *ki* to give foes a 20% miss chance on attacks against her for 1 round. When she attains 18th level, the miss chance increases to 50%.
- **Speedy Climbing:** When a ninja attains 7th level, she can climb vertical surfaces at her land speed rather than at half speed (see the Climb skill description), provided that she has at least one free hand and can begin and end her movement on a horizontal surface. This ability isn't quite the equivalent of walking up walls, but it comes close.
- **Striking the Incorporeal:** Starting at 8th level, a ninja can focus her *ki* to strike incorporeal or ethereal foes as if they were corporeal and present on the Material Plane.
- **Evasion:** At 12th level, a ninja gains the evasion class feature (see the Rogue class feature in the *Player's Handbook*), but only when unencumbered and unarmored. This ability allows her an excellent chance to avoid all damage from attacks that fill large areas.
- **Ghostly Mind:** Starting at 14th level, a ninja becomes difficult to locate through spells of the scrying subschool. This ability helps her vanish from many kinds of magical sight and nicely augments her ability to elude a foe's nonmagical vision.
- **Ghostly Sight:** Beginning at 16th level, a ninja can see invisible and ethereal creatures and objects just as well as she can see normal ones.

## Ninja Weaknesses

As with any class in the **D&D** game, the ninja's advantages come at a price. Below are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering a ninja character.

- **Poor Fortitude and Will Saves:** Because a ninja has the worst progression for Fortitude and Will saves in the game (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*), she isn't good at shrugging off effects that attack her body or mind. However, her *ki* power helps offset her poor Will save, as does the fact that she probably has a high Wisdom score so that she can make optimal use of her *ki* powers and Armor Class bonus.
- **Mediocre Hit Points:** The ninja's 6-sided Hit Dice give her hit point total that's fairly low for a character with so many offensive combat capabilities.
- **Mediocre Armor Class:** A ninja has no proficiency with armor or shields, but she gains a level-based Armor Class bonus and can use her Wisdom bonus (if any) to improve Armor Class. Ninjas also tend to have high Dexterity scores so that they can make the most of their sudden strike class feature, and this innate agility also improves Armor Class in most situations. The ninja's *ki* power can also provide a potent defense. These considerations allow her a reasonable Armor Class, but not a great one. As a result, she tends to be more vulnerable to damage in battle than other martial characters, especially if the combat lasts more than a few rounds.
- **Mediocre Weapon Selection:** The ninja has proficiency with simple weapons and a handful of fairly small martial and exotic weapons. This selection allows her plenty of choices when it comes to weaponry, but no really outstanding options.

## Playing a Classy Ninja

Great ninjas usually use the following techniques, so try to incorporate a few of them into your strategy when you play this kind of character.

### Be Adaptable

Your various abilities allow you to fill many different roles in a party. You can fight well enough to stand in the front line and carry the fight to the enemy, at least for a little while. Because you have access skills and class features that make you stealthy and perceptive, you can also be effective at probing the way ahead, picking locks, and searching for traps. In addition, you might serve as the group's negotiator and diplomat. The best ninjas are ready to switch between these roles as necessary.

### Be Aggressive

Your sudden strike ability is potent, but it depends on striking quickly while your foe is unprepared. Early in your career, your best chance to use sudden strike is at the very beginning of an encounter, when you have a chance to catch someone flat-footed. As you attain higher levels, you can use your *ki* powers to create additional opportunities for sudden strikes, but you'll still need to stay close to the action and be willing to put yourself in harm's way to take full advantage of this ability.

Many of your *ki* powers make you mobile and stealthy, and you'll need to take some risks to use those abilities to best effect as well.

## Be Prudent

Being aggressive pays dividends, but being foolhardy does not. Try to avoid situations in which you must face multiple foes -- or even a few formidable opponents -- alone. Your low hit points and weak Armor Class make you particularly vulnerable to a critical hit, or just a lucky series of hits, whenever you get involved in combat. So when you scout ahead, don't pull too far away from the rest of the group, since keeping help close at hand can greatly improve your chances of survival.

Even when you have allies to keep you safe, try to avoid starting fights in which your companions don't want to be involved. Some situations call for negotiating rather than fighting, so learn to recognize when it's time to talk. Also, be aware that your group can't handle some fights, so don't start something you can't finish, especially when you're dragging your party along with you.

## Always Have a Backup Plan

Situations aren't always what they seem in the **D&D** game, so it pays to have a few extra tricks up your sleeve when an encounter doesn't go the way you think it will. Escape is often the best option when an encounter goes sour, so always have a plan for getting yourself out of whatever you've gotten into.

## Use Your *Ki*

It pays to keep at least one use of your *ki* power in reserve to help with your Will saves, but there's no virtue in finishing a day with most of your *ki* potential unused.

## Remember Who Your Friends Are

Your skills and class features can make you mostly self-sufficient, but going it alone can prove deadly for you. Working effectively with the rest of your party not only promotes your survival, it also helps you achieve outstanding successes.

**The Party's Main Warrior:** This character is a natural fighting partner for you. You can count on him to help finish off foes you attack with your sudden strike ability. In addition, he's your best hope if you find yourself in a situation that you can't fight your way out of alone. On the other hand, your perception skills (such as Spot and Listen) are likely better than his, so be ready to provide a timely warning to prevent disaster from befalling this most important ally.

**The Party's Arcane Spellcaster:** This character is weaker and more vulnerable than you are when it comes to physical combat, so be prepared to come to her aid when trouble arises. You might be the only one who can get free to deal with the situation if the party's arcane spellcaster faces an unexpected threat.

**The Party's Divine Spellcaster:** Get friendly and stay friendly with your party's cleric, druid, or paladin. This character's healing spells can stave off death, especially if you manage to get poisoned or fall victim to some other debilitating attack. You may find that divine spellcasters cramp your style a little -- especially if they're straight arrows and you have a larcenous streak -- but make an effort to stay in their good graces.

## Some Key Equipment

The right gear can prove invaluable for a ninja. The essentials include the following.

- **Armor:** You have no armor or shield proficiencies unless you burn feats to get them, and even light armor or a buckler will negate many of your class features. *Bracers of armor*, however, provide an affordable defensive boost that won't interfere with your class features. Several different items whose effects stack give you better protection at a cheaper price than a single item with a big bonus, so once you have your bracers, add a *ring of protection* and an *amulet of natural armor* as soon as you can afford them.
- **Ability Boosting Items:** Improving your Wisdom score pays big dividends in the form of increased Armor Class, improved Will saves, and extra uses of your *ki* powers. A Dexterity boost also improves your Armor Class and helps you bring your sudden strike ability into play more often.
- **Primary Melee Weapon:** You're proficient with several exotic weapons that enhance your image as a warrior steeped in oriental mysteries. Unfortunately, most of these weapons are designed for a monk's use and aren't the best choices for you. In fact, you can deal more damage with any of several simple weapons than with the exotic weapons available to you. A heavy mace or morningstar deals good damage, but neither makes you look good. If you have a Strength bonus, a two-handed weapon may be a good choice, since you can deal some extra damage with it (see page 113 in the *Player's Handbook*), and you probably aren't using a shield anyway. A spear deals just as much damage as a heavy mace or morningstar and is a two-handed weapon that you can throw. A longspear is a two-handed weapon with reach. Though a reach weapon isn't effective against adjacent foes, you can always keep a light weapon handy to use against opponents that get too close.
- **Backup Melee Weapon:** Always have a light weapon -- or two -- handy. A light slashing weapon, such as a dagger or kama, can help get you out of a tight spot (such as being swallowed whole by a big monster). It's also a nice backup for a reach weapon, as noted above. It also pays to have a hefty weapon on hand in case you lose your primary one or find that it isn't effective. Make sure this weapon deals a different kind of damage than your primary weapon does. For example, if you normally use a spear (a piercing weapon), consider a mace (a bludgeoning weapon) as a backup.
- **Ranged Weapon:** You can greatly increase your survival chances by keeping your foes at a distance during combat. If you can keep the range down to no more than 30 feet, you also retain some ability to use sudden strike. A heavy crossbow deals excellent damage, but it's slow to fire. A composite shortbow offers good range and allows for multiple attacks as your base attack bonus improves.

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## About the Author

**Skip Williams** keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the sage of *Dragon Magazine* for eighteen years. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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